

FIRE NOTE

TOPICS IN THIS EDITION

- STANDARDS AND REGULATION
- PEOPLE
- EDUCATION

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SHARING RESPONSIBILITY – MORE THAN A SLOGAN



- ▲ How to share responsibility in emergency management is different in different circumstances. Here an agency representative and a community member discuss household defence.

Photo: Damian Ford, NSWRFES

CONTEXT

The 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission emphasised that the State, municipal councils, individuals, household members and the broader community need to share responsibility for bushfire safety.

BACKGROUND

The current, and widely supported, focus on the need for shared responsibility in Australian disaster management is in large part a legacy left by the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (Teague *et al.* 2010). The Council of Australian Government's National Strategy for Disaster Resilience (NSDR) gave a principle of shared responsibility even greater policy traction by firmly placing it as a central pillar of a "whole-of-nation, resilience-based approach to disaster management" (Council of Australian Governments, 2011). However, neither the royal commission nor the NSDR, nor any subsequent developments arising from them, have clearly defined what sharing responsibility actually entails. In particular, they say little about what exactly needs to change in the current roles and relationships between government and non-government

DEFINITIONS

Actors: Stakeholders who play a role. This can include groups or organisations, as well as individuals. Government actors could be agencies or individual policy makers for example, while non-government actors can include non-government organisations, community and business groups, or individual people.

Emergent properties: Large-scale patterns within complex systems that are the result of myriad little interactions, e.g. cultures, political systems and financial markets.

SUMMARY

In big picture terms, sharing responsibility for disaster management is about the ways governments and citizens work together to minimise the potential impact of disaster events. This concept was a key theme of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission.

This project sought to open up a process of discussion and examination of this widely supported principle of shared responsibility in Australian disaster management. This was achieved by focusing on its meaning, significance and challenges for the way governments and citizens work together to manage disaster risk.

Findings support the notion that sharing responsibility in disaster management is not straightforward. Government, emergency service agencies, policy makers, communities and individuals all need to be encouraged to discuss and explore what sharing responsibility means for them. There is no one size fits all approach, nor is there a quick fix solution. Findings also indicate the need to develop governance arrangements and processes that are more inclusive of civil society.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This *Fire Note* reports on contributions of the *Sharing Responsibility* project, undertaken as part of the Bushfire CRC Community expectations theme. It is the final *Fire Note* from this project.

AUTHORS

Dr Blythe McLennan (right), Bushfire CRC researcher and Research Fellow, Centre for Risk and Community Safety, RMIT University and Professor John Handmer, Bushfire CRC project leader and Director, Centre for Risk and Community Safety, RMIT University. For more information email blythe.mclennan@rmit.edu.au



actors (see definition, page 1) in order to put it into practice.

Internationally, sharing responsibility between the State and citizens, or governments and communities, is recognised in political and governance research as a core dilemma across a wide range of risk-related policy sectors in a number of countries. This dilemma is connected to a fundamental governance challenge faced by modern democratic political systems today: the changing nature of relationships between government and citizens in the face of dynamic and complex social, economic, environmental, political and technological conditions. Because of this, political researchers and policy makers alike increasingly argue that there is a wide scale need for a “new balancing of responsibilities between different actors and social spheres: government, industry, individual citizens, political organizations and the institutions of civil society” (Sevenhuijsen 2000).

This dilemma is evident in current developments in Australian disaster management. The focus on community resilience and shared responsibility in Australian disaster policy is a particular expression of these broader and more fundamental socio-political dynamics. Yet the connection of widespread political and governance trends to policy discussion on resilience and responsibility remains largely unexamined in Australian disaster research.

BUSHFIRE CRC RESEARCH

This project began with a strong awareness that before decisions can be made about how to pursue shared responsibility, the question of “what is wrong and what needs fixing” (Schön and Rein 1994) needed to be answered. For complex policy problems, answering this question is as much about framing the problem – of selecting from amongst “the various different ways to define what the problem ‘really’ is” (Birkland 2004) – as it is about recognising that a well-defined policy problem exists that needs addressing (Howlett *et al.* 2009). This study was designed to expose and examine how responsibility-sharing challenges in Australian disaster management are framed at different levels.

The project involved five stages:

Stage 1

A structured literature review to examine different ways responsibility-sharing challenges are framed in risk-management research.

Stage 2

Stakeholder engagement. This was an on-going focus, assisting stakeholders to see shared responsibility in new ways.

Stage 3

A policy review of ways to shape responsibility



▲ There was a groundswell of interest throughout the project, as evidenced by the attendance at the project workshops.

END USER STATEMENT

This project has been instrumental in assisting emergency service authorities to think more broadly about their relationship with the community. This includes how best to translate public policy into community supported action, and to collaborate more with all elements of the community to ensure that the community is not a passive recipient of ‘paternally focused’ services, but instead a willing and valuable contributor to improved services, with a better understanding of the need to develop and practice self-reliance.

The work has therefore contributed enormously to the growing body of knowledge about how we as a society deal with risk and uncertainty and to provide some examples of what is currently ‘wrong and what needs fixing’ in respect to responsibility sharing and in developing potential mechanisms to learn from past events and learn to think differently to achieve new ways to share the responsibility for disaster management in appropriate measure.

– Mick Ayre, Director of Regional Operations, Country Fire Service, South Australia

sharing between government and non-government actors (e.g. citizens, community groups, non-government organisations, businesses) across a range of risk management contexts. Examples include implementing laws, developing contracts and influencing behaviours that are socially accepted i.e. unwritten social rules.

Stage 4

Case studies on instances of sharing responsibility.

Stage 5

Synthesis workshops.

The case studies and workshops were combined to examine responsibility-sharing issues encountered in Australian disaster management in a way that was sensitive to the varied perspectives of stakeholders. The first case was the way challenges were reflected in public submissions to the royal commission. Two major stakeholder engagement workshops provided more interactive case studies that engaged a wide range of stakeholders in public conversation about their perspectives on “what is wrong and what needs fixing” with the way responsibility is currently shared.

RESEARCH OUTCOMES

Collectively, the findings from this project provide some answers to two fundamental, underlying questions about shared responsibility: what is it, and how do we do it?

The shared responsibility discussion is calling for a new social contract between government and the governed for disaster management, but half of the contract terms are missing.

At a broad, societal level, calls for a “new focus on shared responsibility” and a “resilience-based approach” are calls for a new social contract for disaster management compared to the recent past. The idea of a social contract is a metaphor for the balance of rights and responsibilities between the State and its citizens (e.g. government and communities)



▲ This research supports decisions about how to pursue a vision of shared responsibility in emergency management.

Photo: CFA Communities and Communication

that is accepted in society – formally and informally – as the legitimating basis for a system of governance.

The idea of a social contract is therefore that governments and communities broadly agree on how rights and responsibilities should be allocated between them. This might be, for example, that property holders have a responsibility to reduce bushfire risk on their properties and make a bushfire survival plan, while also having a right to choose to live in at-risk places. Currently, in Australia there is a lot of disagreement about government and community rights and responsibilities in relation to disaster risk.

By recognising the discussion on shared responsibility and disaster resilience as a call for a new social contract, it is evident that one half of the contract is missing: the rights and benefits that citizens would receive.

The need to include a rights-based discussion is evident in contention over core risk management dilemmas such as the protection of citizen and property holders' rights, the legitimacy and accountability of government agencies and government decisions, and the uneven distribution of impacts, impositions and benefits of disaster risk and risk management activities. A clear implication of this is that a legitimate, new social contract is unlikely to be advanced in Australia without a corresponding rights conversation alongside a discussion on citizen (e.g. 'community') responsibility.

This conversation is not something that just occurs between policy makers, nor does it occur overnight. It is played out through

discussing rights and responsibilities in public debate over sometimes substantial time periods. Post-disaster enquires, or debate in the media, are two examples. These debates all build into informing shared expectations.

There is not a right or wrong way to apply shared responsibility.

While shared responsibility is a singular, overarching vision in Australian disaster policy discussions, when it comes to sharing responsibility in practice, there are a multitude of diverse, yet overlapping and interacting challenges. For this reason shared responsibility is best thought of as an 'emergent property' (see definition box, page 1) of a complex disaster management system.

Significantly, emergent properties are difficult to predict. What they look like cannot be easily determined before they emerge. This suggests that attempts to definitively map out or prescribe what shared responsibility ought to look like may be misguided. A more realistic alternative approach might be to focus on developing processes for stakeholders to collectively negotiate and engage in responsibility sharing at the different levels and in the diverse settings where risk management takes place.

A simple, practical approach to these challenges could be to structure conversations around providing short answers to basic questions. These would scope out the responsibility-sharing challenges and processes and expose the different ways that stakeholders view responsibilities. These questions could include:

- **Sharing responsibility for what?**

Mitigating hazards? Building resilience?
Protecting life? Making informed risk choices?

- **Sharing responsibility between which parties at what levels?**
Emergency service agencies and communities? Property holders and local government? Public and private sectors?
- **Sharing responsibility on what grounds?**
Legal or moral obligations? Social expectations? Capacity to act? Freedom of choice?
- **Sharing responsibility under what conditions and limitations?**
Before, during or after an event? For what type or severity of hazard? Within what legal and institutional structures? In what kinds of natural landscapes?

Questions like these are being developed as a tool to assist stakeholders, which will be produced as part of the longer term utilisation activities arising from the study. Contact the authors for further information.

More inclusive shared responsibility frameworks are needed.

There is a need to develop more inclusive governance frameworks in disaster management at all levels. Inclusive forms of governance explicitly include broader social participation throughout the whole policy process – from agenda setting through to implementation and evaluation (Renn and Schweizer 2009; Aguilar and Montiel 2011). Importantly, these governance processes largely take place outside of the urgency of immediate response to disaster events and their aftermath.

While emergency service agencies and other government actors in Australian disaster management are increasingly engaging more actively with non-government organisations and civil society/communities at various stages in the disaster management cycle, it needs to be said that inclusive governance is not community engagement by another name. Community engagement is commonly a part of implementing a solution to a problem as it is framed by a governmental agency or network. By contrast, inclusive governance frameworks bring together government and non-government stakeholders to collectively frame 'what is wrong and what needs fixing' before decisions about solutions are made.

Of course, developing more inclusive governance frameworks is not a magic bullet for pursuing shared responsibility, nor is it without its own responsibility-sharing challenges. Despite this, there is implicit but firm support for a move towards more inclusive governance in disaster management within



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▲ Emergency management is not just the responsibility of government and agencies. Citizens have a role to play too.

Photo: CFA Communities and Communication

the NSDR and amongst government and non-government disaster management stakeholders. However, there is as yet no clear policy agenda for, nor significant movement towards, actually putting such frameworks into place.

HOW COULD THIS RESEARCH BE USED?

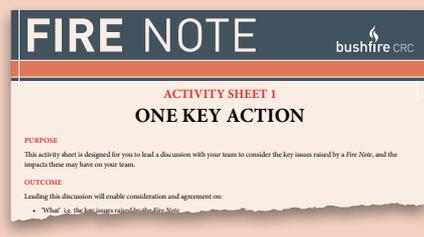
Emergency management is by nature an action-oriented industry that is focused on "getting the job done" under difficult and urgent conditions, with high stakes and in the face of intense public scrutiny. It is no surprise then that most research

that aims to support the sector is solution or implementation-oriented research that focuses on ways to support, enhance or improve practice. While solution-oriented research remains an important focus in disaster research, there is a need for greater attention on the construction of research, policy and management problems in this field. Stakeholders regularly wrestle with the recognition and definition of problems at levels of programs up to policy strategy. This is particularly so now, as emergency service agencies and their industry bodies and networks actively grapple with making sense of, and responding to, major disaster events and the public inquiries that have followed them.

Research that asks and answers questions about the construction, or framing of policy and management problems, supports a deeper kind of reflective learning than solution-oriented research. This is the type of learning that O'Brien *et al.* (2010) describe as focused on "doing it differently" rather than on "doing it [the same thing] better". Consequently it can be contrasted to instrumental or everyday learning that contributes to incremental change and adaptation of existing policies and programs. The approach taken in this study has contributed to asking and answering questions about the construction of the shared responsibility problem that supports this deeper, reflective form of learning.

NOW WHAT?

What three things stand out for you about the research covered in this *Fire Note*? What information can you actively use, and how? Tools are available at www.bushfirecrc.com/firenotes to help, along with activities you can run within your team.



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Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre
Level 5/340 Albert Street
East Melbourne VIC 3002
Telephone: 03 9412 9600
www.bushfirecrc.com

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Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council
Level 5/340 Albert Street
East Melbourne VIC 3002
Telephone: 03 9419 2388
www.afac.com.au

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